



## Creativity without critique

### *An inquiry into the aesthetization of the alternative culture*

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**(working paper)**

**Summary :** *The category of “creative city” is far from neutral. Indeed, it can be linked to very contrasted – and even opposed – practices and urban worlds. In order to grasp those differences, we need to take a closer look at what is entailed in the concepts of “creativity” and “art”, analysing in particular their political dimension. In this paper we defend the idea that it is the ambiguous polysemy of the notion of creativity – especially under the influence of the work of Florida (2002, 2012) – that is the cause of many problems in the contemporary analysis of urban dynamics. Among other, contemporary conceptions of creativity tend to underestimate its potentially subversive dimension in order to accentuate its compatibility with economic imperatives. A striking illustration of this “creativity without critique” is given by the aesthetic register of the « alternative culture » – characterized by recycling practices, urban wastelands – which nowadays tends to become devoid of its political implication and be used as a commercial niche (a process we call « aesthetization »). To illustrate this question, we analyse various examples found in cultural places in Lisbon, Geneva and Ljubljana.*

For the contemporary tourist – guided by his *Easy Jet* magazine – it is nowadays quite normal to visit in European cities arty squats or have a drink in bars full of graffiti and recycled chairs. Usually those places are nowadays only loosely linked to what used to be called “alternative culture”, based on a radical critique of the capitalist society. In other words, they appear more as the aesthetic scene of new consumption niche than places of an enacted critique of the established order (Pattaroni, 2014). In this paper we will attempt to account for this transformation, that is the partial removal of the subversive dimension of the aesthetics of the alternative culture. How was it possible to turn it into a mere “motif” detached from its initial political context and applied as a decorative design in other areas. More fundamentally, at stake beyond what we propose to call here the *aesthetization* of the alternative culture is a relative de-politicization of the central notion of *creativity*, shying it away from its longstanding critical tradition. Indeed *creativity* went, in 40 years, from one of the central category of the critique of capitalism to one of the core concept of the “cognitive capitalism” (Moulier-Boutang, 2007). This is not an anecdotic shift, as the critical dimension of creativity is almost one of its constitutive features.

## **Creativity, Productivity and the Art: Subversion and the City**

*« De la création d'art – rare, exceptionnelle – et de sa divulgation, il en est comme de ces îles désertes dont la sauvagerie, qui en fait l'attrait, cesse sitôt que la propagande hôtelière y amène des touristes. N'y reste plus alors qu'une feinte sauvagerie rebutante et les amateurs de sites rares exceptionnels, cherchent un autre lieu où planter leur tente » (Dubuffet : 43).*

### *The critical stance of creativity*

As it is well known, art isn't intrinsically linked to the idea of *creativity*. It is only around the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and its subjectivist turn, that it begins to supersede a system based on *imitation*. Indeed, up to that time, art was thought of fundamentally as a *mimesis*, an imitation of the world where *beauty* is *truth* (Genard, 2003). On the contrary, creativity was at the centre of a conception of art as a subjective act of the artist seen as a “demiurge”. The new “vocational” status of the artist that came along this art system based on an ideal of *creativity* and *innovation* (Heinich, 1996) expanded rapidly throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to the point of becoming in the last decades the model of the *worker* (Menger, 2002) and of *neo-management* (Chiapello, 1998). A central step in this evolution is the constitution of the romantic ideal of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – along the notion of *bohème* – that gave *creativity* its full critical dimension. Indeed, this model of a creative and unconventional artist became the explicit counter-model to the “ponderous, inhibited, hypocritical bourgeois who is incapable of innovation, wrapped up in convention, in calculation” (Genard). During the last part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century an “artist critique” of capitalism emerged – intertwined with its “social critique” (among others the Marxist one) – based on a denunciation of the oppressing and dehumanization effect of the capitalist system (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999).

It is nevertheless only in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century that this critical and political dimension of creativity took its full dimension within the modernist avant-garde where the subversive individuality of the artist and the political figure of the *citizen* came together in their common refusal of austere bourgeois productivism. By the mid-century, various artists and intellectuals gave it its full theoretical meaning. Thus, for Dubuffet the value of a work of art is measured by the gap that separates it from the establishment: i.e. the value of art is directly linked to its potential for subversion (Dubuffet, 1986 : 99). This opposition between art and establishment is systematized in particular in the work of T. W. Adorno. Indeed for Adorno, art as a principle of non-identity is deeply subversive with regards to the establishment and, as a result, incompatible with a bourgeois order and even more so with the market. Therefore, it doesn't only concern "engaged art" that carries a manifest *message* with a critical aim, but, more fundamentally, the displacement undertaken by art and new realities that it produces. We can link this to Deleuze and Guattari's idea of art opening a "ligne de fuite". Art is subversive *as such* by breaking with an oppressive reality's identity principle, not because it suggests other ways of perceiving the world.

This critique of an *asphyxiating* order – and the new intertwining of *art* and *the political* that it entails – was enacted in particular in the "Events of May 68" that established a new political commitment as much as an artistic commitment of the political. Under the influence of the situationnists among other, the emergence of the *New Left* thus signalled a new relationship between art and the political: on the one hand, politics are no longer restricted to the limits of political institutions but take form in "everyday life"; and on the other hand the different "artistic worlds" open up post-May 68 and extend beyond the official "cultured-culture". As Genard states it, this encounter contributed to a real democratization of the figure of the artist as a creator which is also the start of its later "recuperation" (Genard, 2003).

If *creativity* and *art* took a crucial role it is because the critique had to be enacted in everyday life, questioning not only an abstract system but also the "partage du sensible"<sup>1</sup>, i.e., the functionalist shaping of the space (standardization, zoning, and so on) that was at the root of (re)production of the capitalist urban order (Lefebvre, 1974; Cogato, Pattaroni, Piraud and Tirone, 2013, Pattaroni, 2014) The "alternative culture" was born in this new political perspective, moving away from the traditional and "authoritarian" left – who was in general suspicious toward the subjectivity of artists. As we were able to study it in the history of urban struggle in Geneva (Cogato *et al.*, Pattaroni, 2014), it is more precisely product of an encounter between new leftist movement (Maoist, amongst others) and situationnist perspectives (along with movements such as the living theatre).

During the European urban struggles of the 1970's a double split – vis-à-vis both institutional "democracy" and revolutionary institutions – put into question the entire political and police framework that had been established at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This political framework of "organized modernity" is based upon the development of mass political parties, the rationalization of the State and its means of intervention (statistics, planning, etc.) as well as of means of production (Fordism) (Wagner, 1996). The result was a generalized rejection of all the entities that participate in this reality, whether they were in power or contesting it (the communist movements in particular, shared the major presuppositions regarding an

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<sup>1</sup> We use here Rancière's concept which invite us to reflect on the material and aesthetic dimension of the political (Rancière, 1998, 2000 ; Dikeç, 2012)

organization of the society based on mass representation and rationalization of the production and state apparatus). In terms of the division of perception, this police order was based in particular on an array of territorial measures aiming to manage the salaried masses, standardized social housing, *zoning*, development of road systems (Du Pasquier & Marco, 2009). From then on, *criticism* with regards to the living environment and life in general was taken up, both in Geneva and elsewhere in Europe, by a “New Left” – a multitude of small political groups with wide-ranging ideological orientations, struggling for various causes – against atomic energy, for the Women’s Liberation Movement, pacifist movements, neighbourhood associations, etc. (Duvanel and Levy, 1984; Gros, 1987).

Accordingly the political discourses and practices of this New Left – fed from the double sources of “self-managed” Marxism (i.e. Trotskyism and Maoism) and “psycho analytic theories of the personality and human interaction” (that we find in the writings of Marcuse for example) (Duvanel and Levy, 1984: 119) – constitutes an “alternative culture” marked in particular by a reorientation, a transition from the *democratization of culture* to *cultural democracy* – i.e. from the circulation to the greatest number of a legitimate body of work to the establishment as *culture* of the creations of the largest number of people. In other words, *creativity* (which in this perspective means “the capability of each one”) was not anymore a side activity but it contributed directly to the perceptual and material critique of the established order. In this perspective, “the aesthetics of the alternative culture” was an intrinsic part of its political project. Before we turn to the “aesthetization” process, we have to describe more in detail the perceptual characteristics of the “alternative culture” and the way they corresponded to a critique of the capitalist order. A first step is to better understand the ambiguity of the notion of *alternative*.

### **The political dimension of the Alternative culture and its ambiguities**

*Alternative* isn’t necessarily connected with a *marginal* or *peripheral* kind of world. The word “alternative” comes from “alter”, which in Latin means “other”, another possibility. In this fundamental sense, alternative is about opening new possibilities, therefore about *hope* and *empowering* (Nishat Awan, 2011, p. 27). Nevertheless, as we suggested before, the historical opposing reference – the alter – is the “mainstream culture”, the *dominant* one, making the alternative an opposition. Thierry Paquot et al. (2012) describes this link between the search for experimental lifestyles, the ideological and the physical opposition to norms : an *alternative person* “would be someone who refuses to conform to the norm”, “one that is non-conformist as well as experimental”; *alternative groups* “endeavour to live, to produce, to consume, to educate and to love differently... their paths...[marking]...a divergence from the pervading conformism” and “they offer an aside from what is imposed, normed, prescribed and standardized”; *alternative movements* are “an act of political protest, a stance against the establishment”.

The already classical work of Raymond Williams is probably the most insightful attempt to clarify those ambiguities. Indeed, in his famous article “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory” (1973), Raymond Williams opposes the gramscian notion of “cultural hegemony” to the notion of “alternative culture”. The former, understood to be “a core system of practices, meanings and values that can be considered to be dominant and effective”, doesn’t imply any idea of worth but depends principally on its centrality (Williams, 2006: 136). According to him, hegemony isn’t the product of “simple opinion or simple

manipulation” but rather the results from an “entire body of practices and expectations – the focus of our energy, our basic understanding of human nature and the world around us (ibid). In other words, understood as such, an hegemonic culture can be compared to what Bourdieu called the “practical sense”, something along the lines of a widely shared sense of reality: “the sense of reality that is absolute because it is well-trying, it is very difficult for most members of society to go beyond it, in most areas of life” (ibid).

Williams distinguishes the *alternative elements* and *oppositional elements*, and this shift allows us to analyse more subtly the emergence of contemporary urban practices:

*« There is a simple theoretical distinction between alternative and oppositional, that is to say between someone who simply finds a different way to live and wishes to be left alone with it, and someone who finds a different way to live and wants to change the society in its light. This is usually the difference between individual and small-group solutions to social crisis and those solutions which properly belong to political and ultimately revolutionary practice. But it is often a very narrow line, in reality, between alternative and oppositional. A meaning or a practice may be tolerated as a deviation, and yet still be seen only as another particular way to live. But as the necessary area of effective dominance extends, the same meanings and practices can be seen by the dominant culture, not merely as disregarding or despising it, but as challenging it. » (Williams, 2006 : 138).*

As suggested here by Williams, the narrow line between *alternative* and *oppositional* depends not only on the attitude or will of the actors but also on the range of authorized differences a given order allow for. What happens in reality is the fact that the mere attempt to invent and practice *alternative ways of life* usually confronts the established urban order and its normative ascription of a restricted range of authorized and legitimized lifestyles (Pattaroni, 2007). It is exactly what happened when people in the 70's and 80's started to live – in various squats across Europe – according to the major principles of the raising “alternative culture”.

In our earlier work we have been able to identify some of the major principles governing the squatter's alternative culture (Pattaroni, 2007; Breviglieri, 2009). We believe that those principles were largely shared by the all movements and it is easy also to show that they have been embedded in the actual ideology of the urban sustainable development which can be seen partly as a result of the penetration of the ideals of the urban struggles and the institutionalization of their actors. Briefly stated, the “grammar of the alternative culture” – drawing the “good” ways to organize and live together – was based on 4 major principles : *Self-determination* (self-management, participation and autonomy against authoritarian systems), *Solidarity* (sharing, collectivization of goods against private property), *Hospitality* (conviviality, inclusion against individualization process and exclusion), *Creativity* (Do-it-Yourself (DiY) and subjective expression against standardization and automation process). Those principles weren't an abstract ideology but, as we suggested with the idea of an enacted critique, they actively contributed to a social and spatial transformation of the built environment. When a vacant building is first occupied, the squatters will set about making the place inhabitable. This activity is undertaken in accordance with the shared principles of the “alternative culture”. Walls are demolished in squatted houses in order to allow for shared spaces enabling political and festive assemblies. Objects are collectivized and houses are painted and manually transformed in order to appropriate them and mark their difference within the urban order. Each different coat of paint is the trace of non-standardized human activity where different coloured door frames indicate reused pots of paint. Aesthetics, in this



perspective, is an outcome – or more a coproduction – of the implementation of this enacted or embedded critique, opening up alternative possibilities of living together.

Indeed, this horizontal organization of work leaves “traces” on the physical aspect of the place – frequently without work share. C.S. Peirce (1978) would describe this mark of horizontality and liberation of desire as an “*index*”. These traces form a set of *percepts* and tangible elements that indicate that the work has not been standardized, is not “professional” and has not tried to erase all the traces of the work required for this type of do-it-yourself renovation. The mosaic that adorns the floor of the toilettes of the **Image #1**, for instance, illustrates this desire to live differently – political orientation is inscribed physically on the place.



*Image #1 – Wc mosaic, Menza Pri Koritu, Metelkova, Ljubljana | Bench mosaic, Théâtre Galpon, Geneva, Switzerland (photos by Leticia Carmo, 2014)*

Let's see now in detail these perceptual elements.

## **The aesthetics of the alternative culture**

As we just suggested, alternative culture builds upon an intimate link between politics and aesthetics. Therefore, an alternative experience implies the production of specific places, which tend to group certain spatial and aesthetic characteristics. In the following table (**Table #1**), we can see examples of cultural spaces (in some European cities like Berlin, Ljubljana, Geneva or Paris, and approximately in a timeframe that considers the last 20 years), that join together some common elements of what we call “the aesthetics of the alternative culture”, supported by an architectural structure; working as a whole, this provokes a scenographic effect on this sort of places, which is based on artists’ and craftsmen’s interventions, on recycling practices of construction, rearrangement and decoration and also on a spontaneous, participative, organic action. This way of transforming and appropriating the space in this way enhances the sense of unity of these places, in what concerns its aesthetics, and it also gives them a specific identity. Some of the elements we can identify on these images are:

- the use of street walls as canvas: painted murals, graffiti, tags, stencils, posters, paste-up’s, etc;
- political, poetic and spiritual manifest messages (usually having a strong symbolic character, being present on walls, but also on flags, for instance);

- occupation of old, abandoned or degraded buildings (mainly factories, barracks, storage pavilions, palaces...) and construction of new precarious buildings;
- coloured façades and other particular architectural elements, such as windows, for example;
- use of natural materials, such as wood, and metal handcrafted structures, urban furniture, sculpture or other objects;
- recycled objects and construction materials, which are used also for the previously mentioned cases (old bicycles, hanged old shoes, etc);
- untidy and chaotic environment given by old and ruined elements, such as broken tiles, ceramics and glass, raw and rough details, unfinished work or overlapped interventions;
- “wild” vegetation and gardening.

This aesthetics of the “alternative culture” is intrinsically related to artistic and political practices that tend to work together. It seems to us that Street Art follow the same line – of what we could call “expressive politic” – and is a particular good example of the way art can be constitutive of a political stance. Indeed street art was – and still is to a certain extent – an expression of a rupture with the standard ways of living and a critique of the urban space.

If we focus on this wish for rupture and resistance vis-à-vis the *standard*, we realise that there exists in contemporary settings a clear contrast between the *dominant* and the *alternative*, which is constantly present in the examples we gave. Nevertheless, this dissimilarity is, sometimes, not totally clear-cut. If we explore this issue in a more concrete way, through the analysis of some examples in the city of Lisbon (**Table #2**), we realise that this aesthetics of the alternative culture that we mention is a more complex thing than we might have thought in the beginning. It is probably due to the fact we are in a situation where this aesthetics has already largely been legitimized as part of the ordinary landscapes of contemporary cities. In **Table #2**, we observe some examples of street art and urban creativity that vary in accordance with the adopted technique, the material support or the contents. Some of the walls belong to the streets and some others to inner environments. Nevertheless, they all belong to urban environments and we might agree that they display an alternative kind of aesthetics; yet, their contents definitely vary, the examples presented on the left side of the table clearly being distinct from those on the right side.

So what remains from the subversive dimension of, *Street art* and more broadly of the creative dimension of alternative culture? We may notice that, as we move from the left to the right side of the previously mentioned table of images, the political and social commitment and the critical contents of the examples decrease. We realise as well that, as far as we go to the right of the table, the exposed artistic interventions benefit more and more from institutional support, municipal or private (a factor that is intrinsically related with “creative cities” strategies of the development of the city – Florida, 2012 & Landry, 2003). On the other hand, as we go to the left on this table, the interventions are more spontaneous and critique; therefore more ephemeral. Many of those last examples are “popular appropriations” of small fragments of the city, representing interesting forms of a lively usage of the common space producing stimulating affordances enabling a more intense urban experience and eventual feelings of belonging. The **Image #19** of the **Table # 2** is exemplary of this micro-scale re-appropriation of the city. It acts over just a small detail but it is powerful, because it reinvests the city in order to transform it into a non-ordinary place. It is at this level of action, that we can find a parallelism with the Situationist approaches when they invite us to consider the city

as the place “of a revolutionary transformation of the existence, achieved through the participation of the citizens and the reintegration of the poetic into the ordinary life”<sup>2</sup> (Simay, 2008).

What we call “aesthetization of the alternative culture” – against its aesthetics – is precisely when the *percepts* of this culture starts loosing the link with the project of *everyday appropriation of the urban environment*. More broadly, this “aesthetization” closes practical alternative possibilities to the capitalist dominant urban order. Once aestheticized, the perceptual affordances loose their role of support for re-appropriation (and their emancipatory situationist potential), playing only a visual and consumerist role, as if the “alternative” had become a decorative motif, an architectural style (as *gothic*, or *baroque*, for example). In other words, the link between the *significant* and the *signifier* is broken, and the visual aesthetics of the alternative culture functions as a “floating signifier”. In order to understand this process we need to go back to the history of capitalism and the relation between the “alternative” world and the ideology of the “creative cities”.

#### **IV. Aesthetization of the alternative culture: creativity within the market**

Following the reorganizations of the Seventies, a third age of capitalism emerged which we can call “late” or “cognitive”. In this new capitalist era the share of the production of knowledge, and more widely “the production of man by man”, has risen dramatically. (Moulier-Boutang, 2007). The theories on the “creative economy” constitute a hybrid attempt to describe these transformations and testify the reorganization of social structures around this notion of “creativity”. These theories are hybrid in the sense that they function within a system they describe and that they claim to criticize, at the same time promoting a “creative city” brand (<http://charleslandry.com/>; [www.creativeclass.com](http://www.creativeclass.com)). These theories generally oppose the people who generate income through a creative activity to those who don’t. Yet this re-identifies *creativity* and *productivity*. Indeed seeing how the capital has established any form of externality within itself, these authors equate the lexical field of creativity with that of an *innovation* as part of the process of capitalist production. In the previous methods of production – Fordism – cities served as “infrastructural hubs” favouring business (Sassen). However this new “creative economy” integrates cities as merchandise and a means of production. Cities are no longer outside the process of production but an integral part of it. Thus, the semantic field of *creativity* is reduced to *creativity-productivity*, leaving out the non-capitalist aspect of *creation*.

It is this ambiguous polysemy of the notion of “creativity” – especially under the influence of the work of Richard Florida (2002, 2012) – that is the cause of many problems in the contemporary analysis of urban dynamics. Among others, those contemporary conceptions of “creativity” tend to underestimate its “*élan vital*”, or “vital impetus” (Bergson, 1907, Deleuze, 1966), and, as we argued, their historical subversive dimension. This intended underestimation tends to create a compatibility with economical imperatives. To compensate for this ambiguity we should probably distinguish Florida-Landry’s *creativity-productivity* (2002-2012; 2000) from a Bergson-inspired “vital creativity” in which creativity consists

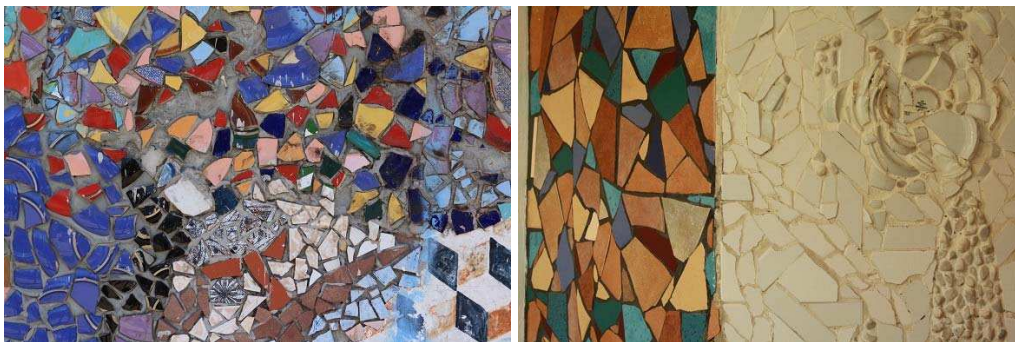
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<sup>2</sup> Our translation of : « le lieu (...) d’une transformation révolutionnaire de l’existence, à travers la participation des citoyens et la réintégration du poétique dans l’ordinaire. »



more generally in the act of creating virtual differences through a *vital impetus* (Deleuze 1966; Kisukidi, 2013). Indeed, in his *Manifeste différentialiste* published in 1970, Henri Lefebvre used the terms of “creativity” and “productivity” to distinguish *creative activities* from those that are involved in the process of capitalist production. From this perspective, “creativity” sides with “use value” and therefore can be opposed to the “exchange value”. This dimension of “creativity”, with regards to capitalist productivity, is generally present in the Marxist conception of art.

We believe that this distinction is very important to understand the transformations of the relation between *dominant* and *alternative* culture (**Image #2 and Image #3**), and more specifically the way « alternative culture » tend to become a mere aesthetic motif of the contemporary « creative city » losing its subversive dimension. This shift is not only a matter of ideological transformation: it plays out in the way *alternative culture* and the various artistic practices have been institutionalized (towards a *productive-creativity*).



*Image #2 – Walls’s ceramics covering mosaic, at Metelkova, Ljubljana. On the image on the left we can see the grassroots’ technique, made up with broken tiles, plates, etc, while on the image on the right we can see the wall of the youth hostel Celica, decorated by the artists’ group Sestava and run by the students’ organization ŠOU. (photos by Leticia Carmo, 2014)*



*Image #3 – Walls of Avenida de Berna, in Lisbon, interventions done side by side – second one by the artist +- (photos by Leticia Carmo, 2013, and Mischa Piraud, 2014)*

For instance, *Street art* as an underground and grassroots movements was at first mostly non-professionalized. But slowly, along its recognition as a legitimate art and an interesting input for the quality of urban environment (as a form of *urban creativity*), street art has evolved and become more and more professionalized and institutionalized to the point that its techniques are nowadays part of the academic formation.

In order to analyse more in detail those transformations, and open up the concept of institutionalization, it is interesting to distinguish three levels of action within the universe of

*urban creativity*,: 1) grassroots and popular; 2) artistic (professionalized); 3) business. The trend is clearly from 1 towards 2 and 3. It is both a *professionalization* of alternative artistic expression and more fundamentally, as we suggested with the idea of cognitive capitalism, an *integration* of *creativity* within the core of capitalist process (*creative management*).

Just like Boltanski and Chiapello enlighten about the integration of the “artistic critique” in the neoliberal system (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999), there has been an integration of the “alternative universe” in the market and in city development strategies sustained by the concept of “creative cities”. And this process occurs mainly through the recycling of the aesthetics, by creating an image, just as if *alternative* had become a slogan, or one more brand in the competitive worldwide market taking advantage of the process in order to make profit with it. In other words in this context of advanced capitalism, the term “alternative” seems to have become autonomous from its original *signified* form and functions as a “floating signifier” (Lévi-Strauss, 1950). The term is distanced from its original meaning and evolves away from its depart point. “Alternative” therefore no longer designates a non-hegemonic cultural system, but just a *style* that can be commodified.

In other words, the *percepts* of the traces of DiY that were at the roots of the aesthetics of alternative culture have now blossomed in many different places – more or less institutional ones or with a mercantile purpose – mostly removed from alternative principles, modes of organization and ways of life. In this way, this register of perception detached from its “signified” becomes the autonomous register of “hip” and “trendy”, but also of “sustainable development” and “creative cities”. In Geneva, the café *La Petite Reine* (just behind the central station) resorts to a whole series of “alternative” symbols, as we can see on the **Image # 4**. *La Fureur de Lire* hired interior designers to decorate it in a “squat style”. In Lisbon, similar processes happen, like for instance in places as *Pensão Amor*, *Lx Factory* or *Casa Independente* (**Image #4**). *Pensão Amor* used to be a brothel existing in an underground street of Lisbon, and when it was transformed into an *alternative cultural (night) place*, the designers and the architects responsible for the new project decided to recover those *underground* memories in the new decoration of the place (**Table #3**). In this commodification of the aesthetics of the alternative culture, it can be argued that the creativity’s subversive potential has waned.



Image #4 – *La Petite Reine*, in Geneva, and *Lx Factory* and *Casa Independente*, in Lisbon (photos by Leticia Carmo, 2012, 2014)

Under this ideology, and its counterpart of the sustainable urban development, Lefebvre’s “the right to the city” (Lefebvre, 1968) has become a slogan that is conveniently used at any time, being easily found amongst the wide offer of graffiti that decorate the walls of the cities (Paquot, 2012, p. 269). *Participation* is not anymore the outcome of urban struggles and of

occupied spaces but it is now registered in the texts of law<sup>3</sup> (Collectif Etc, 2012, p. 178). It is within such broader transformations of urban policies that the aesthetization of alternative culture takes its full political meaning, as an essential part of the larger process of producing the contemporary “guaranteed” and “attractive” urban environment.

## V. Alternative as a trademark

Just as the *participative process* is gradually being framed by institutional authorities, so is the space of the city. This space is becoming more and more controlled, and reorganised under certain rules and obeying to particular laws, standards and regulations. As for this matter, the sociologist Marc Breviglieri draws on a *guaranteed city* (“la ville garantie”), where the urban environment is becoming more and more framed and “functionally normalised” and where spontaneity is disappearing and everything becomes safely predictable<sup>4</sup>. Such process of normalisation may lead to different kinds of consequences, such as:

- the control of one’s behaviour, which can be made through the design of objects, urban furniture and environments, thus preventing people from acting in undesired ways (sometimes, actually, resulting in a very “unpleasant design”<sup>5</sup>, just like, for instance, is elaborated by Savić and Savičić (Savičić & Savić, 2013));
- pre-defined and “convenient” ambiences created for a specific place.

*Street art* has a big influence in this matter of the creation of controlled ambiances, as if its purpose was the creation of huge *scenographic* panels at the scale of the city, thus becoming the stage for the expected actions of their actors (the inhabitants). In the case of Lisbon, for example, institutional (municipal) agents like GAU (Galeria de Arte Urbana) define which walls are or are not authorised for painting, in order to fight “vandalism”, according to GAU’s official Sílvia Câmara (in (Masbouni, 2013, p. 116). Consequently, spontaneous artistic action in the city is being controlled. A dilemma nevertheless results from this, since in 2013 a new law<sup>6</sup> was enacted that punishes illegal graffiti as a crime, the institutional context appearing in this way as contradictory: one institution protecting *street art* (GAU), while the other is punishing it (the national law). Being aware of the role assumed, GAU states that “urban art makes obviously part of the attracting power that Lisbon has over tourists or young creatives” (notice that Sílvia Câmara mention “urban art” and not “street art”). Nevertheless, it is interesting to see that they are also aware of the limits of their program: « The institutionalization of protest and independent forms is often accused of political

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<sup>3</sup> Our translation of : “Nous sommes arrivés à une situation étonnante: l’impérative participation des habitants à la fabrique de la ville est actée, inscrite dans les textes de la loi!”

<sup>4</sup> “L’environnement urbain contemporain subit une normalisation fonctionnelle, il est désormais comme entièrement recouvert par un espace de références conventionnelles facilitant la prévisibilité de l’utilisation normale qu’on peut en faire » (Breviglieri, 2013, p. 218)

<sup>5</sup> <http://unpleasant.pravi.me/>

<sup>6</sup> Lei n.º 61/2013 de 23 de Agosto (<http://dre.pt/pdf1sdip/2013/08/16200/0509005092.pdf>)

appropriation of a popular expression that resists to the idea of “framing”<sup>7</sup> (Sílvia Câmara, in (Masbouni, 2013, p. 118).

Also the *creative clusters* (or *creative industries*) have a similar role on this process. *Fábrica do Braço de Prata*, *Lx Factory*<sup>8</sup>, or more recently *Village Underground Lisbon*<sup>9</sup> are good examples, in Lisbon, of spaces that promote *street art* artists. But then, once again, these are controlled spaces for art production (the word “cluster” itself is already a sign of that), where – just like those “authorised walls” – places are available for *urban art* rather than *street art* (considering that *street art* has necessarily a spontaneous and free character, and that *urban art* works through curatorship processes and commissions, generally speaking). Hardly will subversive dimension be present in these walls now considered as *works of art*.

At this point, we would like to enlighten the importance of 3-dimensional space in relation to the graffiti and urban art, and the alternative culture. Not only walls have the role of supporting this kind of art, as we have already seen through some examples presented in the **table of images #2**, but also some architectural structures do have that role. One of the best examples is the Village Underground (**Table #4**), that represents most of the main issues we have discussed on this paper:

- graffiti painting as a ‘work of art’, and scenography of the overall scene (by Corleone, as part of the outside exhibition of the *Underdogs* gallery);
- labyrinth 3-dimensional structure, calling to explore its non-linear path within an adventurous spirit and an appealing sensible approach;
- semi-vacant post-industrial wasteland as the chosen place for territorial occupation (inside a delimited area of *Carris*, the public transportation company);
- containers as the architectural support, representative of the latest years’ fashion of recycled ready-made architectures of rusty, unfinished and raw materials;
- normalised details: necessary safety objects, clean and finished construction details, uniformed and designed fancy furniture, sponsoring panels.

The combination of urban art, design, architecture and urban wastelands seems to be a formula of success to attract young *creatives*, supported by a “total design” that now also includes “creative management”. This is obviously not the world of the counter-culture, but it is nevertheless based on alternative aesthetics, as we have seen. In the counter-cultural architectural experiences, the political and the subversive dimension of *creativity* play together in the *everyday life environment*. These total spaces are at the same time places to sleep, to encounter the other, to party, to create and to meet politically, and tend to disappear due to strict delimitation of functions (linked with security and market logics). What remains are places which look like squats but do serve for capitalist compatible creative activities.

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<sup>7</sup> Our translation : « L’institutionnalisation de formes essentiellement contestataires et irréductiblement indépendantes est souvent taxée de récupération politique d’une expression populaire qui résiste à toute idée de “cadrage”. »

<sup>8</sup> In collaboration with Wool (<http://www.woolfest.org/about/wool-the-name/>)

<sup>9</sup> Associated with Underdogs gallery (<http://www.under-dogs.net/>)

Nevertheless places like *Lx Factory*, a nearby creative cluster in a former industrial compound, not only look alternative but they also embed part of the principles of the *alternative culture* (as they were integrated in the urban policies, new management principles and more broadly sustainable development ideology). The situation is therefore complicated and we should avoid raising a simplistic critique of the *aesthetization* of the alternative culture. Prior actors of that culture are now the producers of the guaranteed urban order), trying to promote creative places and participatory process (and even self-management within the institutions). The limit between *critique* and *reinforcement of the established order* is very thin and blurred. Artists themselves tend to oscillate between mere animators of the city (producers of its various ambiances) and actors of new critical intervention with the inhabitants. Theories of art reflect those new ambiguities, as it is shown by the movement “les nouveaux commanditaires” who attempt to remove art from capitalism – undoing what happened in the last decades (Hers & Douroux, 2011). The ambiguity of the treatment of *street art* – at the same time recognized and criminalized – is another indicator of this complexity. We believe that a detailed description and theorization of those processes of institutionalization – the “*anesthetization*” of alternative culture being only a part of the story, as is shown in the example of the *Village Underground* – is central in order to renew the possibility of artistic, social and political critique.

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## Table #1 AESTHETICS OF THE ALTERNATIVE CULTURE



Binz

*Paris*



*Zurich (2013)*

photos by Letícia do Carmo

Paris, Rivoli 59 (2006)



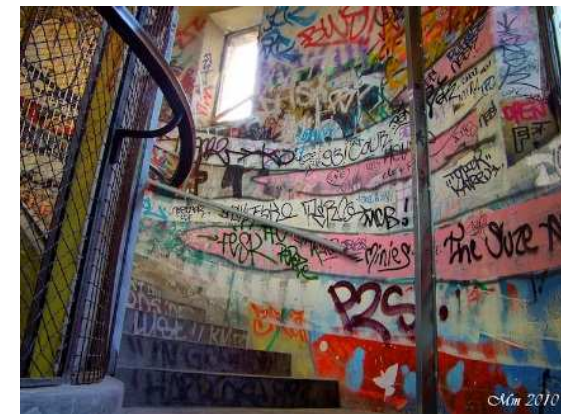
(found in [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Squat\\_%C3%A0\\_Paris\\_%2859\\_rue\\_de\\_Rivoli,\\_1er\\_ardt%29.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Squat_%C3%A0_Paris_%2859_rue_de_Rivoli,_1er_ardt%29.jpg))

Binz



(found in <http://www.lemouv.fr/diffusion-t-es-pas-squat>)

Binz



(found in <http://hipparis.com/2013/12/30/la-maison-des-frigos-art-cooking-as-labors-of-love-in-paris-13th-arrondissement/>)





New Yorck, Bethanian



Rigaerstrasse,  
Friedrichshain



Haus  
Schwarzenberg,  
Mitte

(found in : <http://www.taz.de/!59763/>)

## Table #1 AESTHETICS OF THE ALTERNATIVE CULTURE



Supamöllli, Friedrichshain



Die Taschelles, Mitte

### *Berlin (2013)*

photos by Leticia do Carmo

Köpi



Jaime Masip 2010



**Table #1** AESTHETICS OF THE ALTERNATIVE CULTURE



Metelkova Mesto



*Ljubljana (2012-14)*  
photos by Letícia do Carmo

Tovarna Rog





## Table #1 AESTHETICS OF THE ALTERNATIVE CULTURE



Usine



*Geneva (2013)*  
photos by Letícia do Carmo

L'Îlot 13



La Reliure



Lissignol

Artamis, 1996-2008  
(found in <http://www.jjkphoto.ch/artamis.htm>)





## Table #2 – Street Art in Lisbon

Decreasing level of political commitment >>>>

>>>> Creative city ?

### exteriors



1. “Por um país mais pobre!”, paste-up based on the speech of José Sócrates (ref: <http://www.stick2target.com/por-um-pais-mais-pobre/>)



2. Stencil made up from a photograph of a protester taken after the confrontation with the police. (réf unknown)



3. Alfama – stencil of a girl looking out of a “bricked” window.



4. Rossio - intervention on storefront of bankrupted store.



5. Amoreiras – intervention on broken wall (réf: <http://www.designboom.com/weblog/cat/10/view/13448/dynamite-graffiti-paint-in-lisbon.html>)



6. Casa da Severa, Mouraria – Fado mural.



7. Cç da Glória - authorised graffiti walls (GAU)



8. Av Fontes Pereira de Melo - Cronos project, by the artists Os Gémeos & others.



9. Escadinhas de São Cristóvão – commissioned wall, by the artist Mário Belém and others.



## Table #2 – Street Art in Lisbon

### interiors



10. Mob (Bairro Alto) - Nadya Tolokonnikova (Pussy Riot).



11. Primeiro Andar (Baixa) - wall collage composition



12. Lx Factory (Alcântara), Pato Lógico.



13. Pensão Amor, by Mário Belém e Hugo Makarov

### Messages | content



14. Anjos - Political stencil



15. Bairro Alto – Zé dos Bois mural, by António Alves



16. Rua do Alecrim - "Silêncio", painted on the façade of an abandoned building, by the artist +/-.



17. "Alegria no Trabalho, water reservoir, Lx Factory (réf Nuno Morão, 2008, found on flickr)

## **Table #2** – Street Art in Lisbon

### Different supports



18. Alfama – manifest message on a wall.



19. Cais do Sodré - site-specific intervention (playing with the pre-existent objects).



20. Mouraria – assemblage, recycling intervention with old frames, etc.



21. Cais do Sodré - Colourful and convivial urban furniture.

*All pictures taken by Letícia do Carmo, except those mentioned.*



**TABLE #3 - AESTHETIC-MEMORIES OF THE ALTERNATIVE CULTURE & AESTHETISATION**



*Pensão Amor, Lisboa (murals on the stairs by Mario Belem & Hugo Makarov)*

*Before*



*After*



(PA archive)

All photos taken by Letícia do Carmo, except those mentioned.

## **Table #4 – Village Underground Lisbon**

### Graffiti



### Labyrinthine Path



### Urban wasteland



### Containers



### Normalised 'details'



*Pictures taken by Filipe do Carmo or found on FB Village Underground website.*